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**PLAN**

**WRITE**

**TRIM**

**CHECK**

# Writing Words That Work

A Guide for Extension Workers

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Federal Extension Service

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

In this age of communication, it's important for you extension workers to see a story clearly and tell it plainly so you will make your words work for you and your readers.

This booklet is written to help you tell your story plainly to average readers in shirt-sleeve English—the down-to-earth brand we use every day when we talk to each other. That's the way we must write to communicate to lay readers. Remember, all of us are laymen on some subject and need it explained simply the first time.

Writing informally does not mean we surrender our dignity and culture and write ungrammatically. We must use judgment in simplifying our extension writing: *simplifying does not mean primerizing.*

Readable writing, alias plain talk, is the language of the classics. Remember how Mark Twain talked to us in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 6th–7th grade language? How Lincoln immortalized 268 words at Gettysburg, including 196 one-syllable words?

Readable writing is writing that people read comfortably. To paraphrase Carl Sandburg, readable writing is language that takes off its coat, spits on its hands, and goes to work. It's shirt-sleeve English that communicates clearly in words that work, in words that people read.

*What do people read?*

They read writing that . . .

Tells them in concrete words it will pay them to read it.

Relates to their interests and needs.

Is readable, reliable, realistic, relevant and recent (or hung on a timely peg).

Readability is like a blood tonic—it increases circulation.

PLAN, WRITE, TRIM, and CHECK are four steps in writing what people read, in writing readable writing that makes sense for readers. These writing tips tell you how to—

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# WRITING WORDS THAT WORK

## A Guide for Extension Workers

Amy Cowing  
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### Plan Easy Reading

You cannot make people understand a subject unless you understand that subject yourself.  
William Jennings Bryan.

How well your words work for your readers depends on how skillfully you plan your writing. You have to think through what to say as well as how to say it. Good planning helps you visualize your readers and identify your subject with their interests and needs.

As Schopenhauer said, "Write the way an architect builds, who first drafts his plan and designs every detail . . . *The first rule of a good style is to have something to say*; in fact, this in itself is almost enough."

Before you put words on paper that will bait, hold, sell, and tell readers you must—

### Select

**Why—your reasons for writing the publication.** What's your purpose? What do you want your information to accomplish? Do you want to stimulate interest in a program, or are you trying to show people how to do something? What problems are you trying to help readers solve?

*If you don't know what you are trying to do, how can you expect your readers to figure it out?*

**Who—your readers.** Who are the people you want to reach? You can't help people solve their problems until you know who they are and what their problems are. Know what your readers know and what they want to know. Visualize their educational, social, and economic levels; their interests, attitudes, and beliefs.

Do your readers have the equipment, environment, and capacity to use your information? Remember you are writing for readers; the more you know about them, the better your chance of having readers.

**What—your facts.** Have something to say and be sure of your facts. List facts that help readers solve a problem. Find a slant, a central theme to develop. Weigh facts: Is information timely and of local interest? Does it meet a need? Is it practical: Can people use it; can they afford to use it?

**How—your outline for writing facts.** Think through: (1) how you are going to package your facts; (2) how are you going to present them. First, make a rough outline of facts listed.



## Sift Facts

Screen out difficult concepts that are beyond your reader's experience and understanding. List essential facts necessary to tell your story clearly—just enough facts to cover the angle of your subject. “Never be more exact than the occasion calls for,” said Aristotle. But good sifting of facts does not mean distorting facts. “Ask yourself, does my utterance correspond to the facts?” said Plato.

Good sifting of facts is one of the secrets of talking “adult” in simple language; the secret of not talking down to readers or talking over their heads.

## Sort Facts

Group facts under main headings; this helps you sift facts. Keep related things together to avoid duplication. Be a good housekeeper: sort your facts in logical (1–2–3) order. Don't flea hop from point to point in disorganized fashion.

## Sell Facts

Rearrange your facts in the order your readers will like and understand. Identify your subject with their interests as well as their needs. Pack your writing with appeal: tell readers *it's good to eat* before you say *it's good for you*. Information must entertain as well as inform; must be clever as well as clear.

Remember, your reader doesn't *know* as much about your subject as you do; your reader doesn't *want* to know as much about your subject as you do; and of this you can be sure—your reader won't have your inclination to read your stuff.

Bait your reader's interest with live subheads and eye-catching titles. A good title with a live verb *sells* your readers on reading your writing. A good title selects your audience. It sorts out *you*, the reader, and identifies the subject with *your* interest.

Short paragraphs, short sentences, short words sell your ideas; they help surround your words with white space. White space is eloquent: ideas flourish in white space.

**Briefly, how do you plan easy reading?** First, think through *why* you are putting out your publication, *who* it's for, *what* you want to tell them and *how*.

*Select:*

Why you're writing—your purpose.

Who you're writing for—your audience.

What you want to tell—your message.

How you'll outline facts—your plan.

*Sift:* Screen out irrelevant ideas.

*Sort:* Group ideas under main headings; put related ideas together; put first things first.

*Sell:* Motivate your readers to read, believe, and use your information. Rearrange ideas in the order your reader will like.

. . . Bait your reader: catch his interest with a good title.

. . . Orient your reader: identify subject with his interest.

. . . Slant your outline to what your reader wants and needs to know.

. . . Summarize in a challenging way.

As long as you put yourself in your reader's place, you'll sell your ideas.

# Write Sense for Readers

Style may be defined as proper words in proper places. Jonathan Swift.

After you plan, you are ready to write. When you write information for average adults, you are forging a tool of self-education—something they choose to read voluntarily. The trick is to combine what they want to read with what they ought to read; write it in plain talk that is down to earth where you find readers.

How well you *sell* your readers on reading and using your ideas depends on how clearly you *say*

them. In the final analysis, words are your salesman. How you choose and use your words, and how you punctuate them, determine whether people read your writing or throw it in the wastebasket.

Your writing has better chances of not landing in the wastebasket if you *say* your facts in:

*Short sentences*—the shorter the better. Sentences with one idea or one related range of ideas. It's the complex sentence that makes writing difficult.

*Short words*—the shorter the better. The simplest word and simplest word form that carries your meaning. It's the complex word that makes writing difficult.

*Personal words*—the more the better. Words about persons or addressed to persons (boy, girl, they, you, we, John, Mrs. Jones, etc.).

*Personal sentences*—the more the better. Sentences addressed to your reader (questions, exclamations, quotations, incomplete sentences, those starting with verbs).

These four guideposts for clear writing help you bait, hold, sell, and tell your readers. They are the fundamentals of *readability*—the know-how of making sense for readers. They are the easy-reading ingredients suggested by the Flesch readability formula described in this manual.

Doesn't it make sense that the more simply you write, the more sense your words make for your readers? Suppose Ben Franklin had written, "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man salubrious, opulent, and sagacious." Do you think we would still be quoting this proverb?

Did you know that Franklin did not originate the statement "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise"? He borrowed it from something written in 1598 called "A Health to the Gentle Profession of Servingmen," in which the original ran as follows: "That he may be healthy, happy, and wise, let him rise early."

Franklin changed this enough to make it his own words. He threw out the *that* clause, threw in a live verb makes, changed the word order, and gave the sentence rhythm and rhyme.

His immortal proverb shows how words themselves are only one cause of reading difficulty. How you use words, the word form, word order, and rhythm help determine whether you inform or confuse people.

Words and punctuation marks are your tools for writing. How you use these tools determines whether or not you make sense for readers.

## Words—Your Tools for Writing

Language consists of two parts: the things we say and the machinery by which we say them. Dr. Rudolf Flesch, Author, Readability Consultant.

Think of words as tools for your writing. Eight kinds of words are all you have to write any communication; you remember them as *parts of speech*.

It's more than 2,300 years since Aristotle first thought of parts of speech and these old tools still work!

1. **Nouns** name persons, places, and things. *Concrete* nouns name things we can see, hear, touch, smell or taste. Examples: field, music, cloth, smoke, milk. *Abstract* nouns name qualities of things. Examples: beauty, honesty, humanity. Spell out some abstract words in specific terms to help your reader interpret your intended meaning. "Never tell about a better *civilization*, but about a better chicken, a better pig, a white-washed home," said Seaman A. Knapp.

2. **Pronouns** stand in for nouns. (*Pro* in Latin means *for*.) Use pronouns, especially personal pronouns, to avoid tiresome repetition of nouns and long names. You can refer to a home demonstration agent as *she* or *her*, and to agricultural extension workers as *they*, *their*, or *them*. The personal pronoun *you* is the most important word to your reader, next to his name. "Don't be shy of pronouns," says Sir Ernest Gowers.

3. **Verbs** express action or being of persons, places, or things. Examples: People *read* readable books. The city *overlooked* the bay. Vitamins *grow* in your garden. A verb *is* a word that means *to do* or *to be*. A live verb in active voice is the strongest word in your writing. Example: Readability *opens* doors for readers. A live verb *puts* life and power in your words; it's the engine of your sentence and makes it go. Live verbs *pack* a punch.

Use verbs to replace nouns, adjectives, and prepositions wherever possible.

*Why say:* Consumption of vegetables by local families is at the minimum subsistence diet-level.

*Say:* Local families eat too few vegetables.

4. **Adjectives** tell on, or modify, nouns and pronouns. (*Jacere*, from Latin, means *to throw* or *hurl*. *Ad* means *to* or *at*.) You throw adjectives at nouns and pronouns to describe them. Adjectives are gossip words; use just enough for seasoning.

You have to use *defining* adjectives, like *extension* worker, *dental* health. But avoid *commenting* adjectives like *good*, *early*, *few*, *pleasant*—they weaken your noun; that's why they're called the enemy of the noun. Commenting adjectives give opinion rather than fact. Articles are adjectives that point out nouns. Examples: *a* man, *an* orange, *the* book. Articles tag along with nouns, sometimes where not needed.

5. **Adverbs** tell on verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. They are gossip words that tell *how*,

*when, where, why.* Examples: quietly, immediately, somewhere, therefore. Sometimes you have to use these motion words to strengthen your verbs. But avoid empty superlatives: extremely, exceedingly, very.

6. **Prepositions** usually precede nouns or pronouns. (*Pre* in Latin means *before*.) Examples: of, by, for, with. Preposition means a *before* position. That's how word got around that you should never use a preposition to end a sentence *with*. But like all rules, the rule on prepositions is flexible; use a preposition to end a sentence if it makes more sense that way. Who ever objected to such Shakespearean classics as "We are such stuff as dreams are made *on*" or "The thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir *to*"?

Winston Churchill's secretary crossed out a preposition at the end of one of his sentences. Replied Churchill: "This is the kind of pedantry up with which I will not put."

Too many prepositional phrases clog your writing. Use sparingly. Sentences become stilted with too many prepositions like these in italics: One of the most important sources of dissatisfaction *with* the role of homemaker, particularly *in* respect to the upper group, was the lack of time *for* the pursuit of personal interests.

7. **Conjunctions** join words, phrases, and clauses; you use them in writing like pauses in conversation. (*Junction* means joining; *con*, together.) Sometimes you have to use these tissue words (and, of, for, if, unless, as), *but* don't use too many. Sometimes use a semicolon in place of *but* (maybe in preceding sentence), and in place of *and*, *besides*, and *however*. These conjunctions are often unnecessarily overworked.

8. **Interjections** exclaim. The word comes from two Latin words meaning to *throw into*. You throw interjections into sentences to add spice and tang. They have no grammatical connection with other words in the sentence. Example: Lo, each interjection stands alone. Usually information doesn't need such peppery interjections as *oh, ah, ho, lo, ouch* to communicate an idea.

**Briefly, how you use words determines their parts of speech**—determines whether you confuse or inform people. To inform them clearly:

Use more verbs and nouns than adjectives and adverbs.

Use live, active verbs and strong, concrete nouns.

Sometimes use pronouns for nouns.

Use few adjectives, prepositions, and conjunctions.

## Punctuation Marks—More Tools for Writing

Write so as to be clear with a minimum of stops and use stops for clarity. Sir Ernest Gowers, Author.

Proper punctuation goes hand in hand with clear communications. The right punctuation breaks up your message in small doses easy to take. Think of punctuation marks as tools for your writing. Often they help you save words, are more expressive than words, and make your meaning clear to your reader. The better you plan your word order in sentences, the less punctuation you need.

Today's trend toward less punctuation calls for skillful phrasing and punctuating. For example, see how a comma changes the meaning completely in these sentences:

The specialist said, the county agent is a walking encyclopedia.

The specialist, said the county agent, is a walking encyclopedia.

Let your ear and common sense guide you in the use of commas and other punctuation marks. Think of them as traffic signals: *go, wait, stop*.

When your reader sees no punctuation, he keeps going. A comma, semicolon, colon, or dash signals him to wait. A period, question mark, and exclamation point are full stops. They tell him, *One idea ends here so get ready to go again in a new sentence*.

**A comma** signals your reader to pause less time than for a semicolon or colon. When needed you use commas to separate words, phrases, and commenting clauses from the rest of the sentence.

**A semicolon** signals a longer pause than a comma but shorter than a period. It tells your reader to wait for some related ideas to come; it ties related ideas together. You use a semicolon between two independent clauses not linked by a conjunction (as in previous sentence).

**A colon** signals your reader to pause and get ready for something to come: one or more items that you set off from rest of sentence (like this).

Sometimes you can use colons and semicolons instead of periods the way Thackeray did: "Life is a mirror: if you frown at it, it frowns back; if you smile it returns the greeting."



Note how Thackeray uses a colon to introduce the next two independent clauses; how semicolons separate clauses and tie related thoughts together. Using periods to separate these independent clauses would make his sentence choppy. Always remember: readability is variety, not monotony.

**Dashes** enclose aside statements or sudden shifts of thought. Example: There is one important point—namely, the business management—that you failed to mention.

Use dashes with caution. Use them occasionally to change your writing pace or for emphasis. Like this: G. K. Chesterton, speaking on the emancipation of women, noted: “Twenty million young women rose to their feet with the cry, ‘We will not be dictated to!’—and then proceeded to become stenographers.”

**Parentheses** enclose aside remarks in an incidental way. Example: Late in the winter she learned that the remaining workers (for many had run away) had decided not to plant the crop.

**Periods, question marks, and exclamation points** say, *Stop*. Have plenty of periods handy and use them often to keep sentences short. Sometimes make commas into periods, semicolons, or colons.

**Paragraphing** is punctuating. To add interest to your writing, break up your writing into short paragraphs. You separate thoughts by packaging them in separate paragraphs. Short paragraphs give your writing punch.

To illustrate, put the last 3 words of the following excerpt in a separate paragraph and you'll make it more dramatic:

As we turned the corner, an automobile banged into a brick wall. The driver was slumped over the wheel. His arms hung limply at his side.

He was dead.

In “How to Write, Speak, and Think More Effectively” Flesch sums up punctuation as a tool to help you write like you talk:

“There is punctuation, for one thing. Since you will shorten your sentences, you'll make many commas into periods. Other commas you'll take out since the better sentence rhythm will make them unnecessary. You will tie some of your short sentences together by using semicolons instead of periods between them—or colons, if the first sentence serves as a curtain-raiser to the second. You will improve the paragraphing—usually by breaking longer paragraphs into two or three smaller ones. Your shorter sentences will force you into

shorter paragraphs; there is a natural relation between the two.”

## Make Your Sentences Sell

A sentence should read as if the author, had he held a plow instead of a pen, could have drawn a furrow deep and straight to the end. Henry Thoreau.

How you put words in sentences and how you punctuate them determine whether you can draw a furrow deep and straight to the end. Sentences should not be so long that your reader loses his way in them.

Detours make your reader lose his way; they make sentences hard to read. Imagine an average reader finding his way through this college English stuffed with such detours as commenting *which* clauses and prepositional phrases:

Vitamin A is a fat soluble compound, the function of which is concerned with the maintenance of the epithelial structures of the body and the preservation of normal physiology in the eye. The carotenes WHICH constitute the chief precursors of the vitamin A of normal human nutrition are formed in plants and must be converted by the body into vitamin A, WHICH is found in yellow and green and in some red-colored vegetables and in certain animal products, before it becomes available for either immediate nutritional needs or storage in the body.

Complex sentences like these cause reading difficulty. At least 11 ideas—way too many—are telescoped into 2 sentences averaging 46 words. Second complex sentence has 60 words including 10 prepositions and 2 commenting *whiches*.

Write the way you talk and you can say the same ideas clearly in 5 sentences that average 18 words—in this 7th grade language:

Vitamin A—in fact, all vitamins—help to protect against infection. A is one of the vitamins needed for growth and for healthy teeth, bones, and nerves. Vitamin A is important for good skin and good linings to nose, mouth, and organs throughout the body.

You get vitamin A by eating ripe yellow and green vegetables and some red-colored ones . . . tomatoes, for example; also from liver, butter, and eggs.

Bright colors in food are often—though not always—like flags, signaling with yellow, green, orange, or red, *This way for vitamin A*.

**One idea per sentence.** *The best single thing you can do to write simply is to write in short sentences.* What is a short sentence? A sentence is short if it expresses one idea clearly. As Walter Pitkin said, "Say one and only one thing in each sentence. When you must qualify something you have said in one sentence, do so in the very next sentence.

To be clear is your first duty, no matter what your purpose or subject.

"The first rule is to use simple words in short sentences as far as possible. But how far is 'possible'? Just as far as your thoughts can thus be expressed to the people you address. The longer a sentence, the harder it is to grasp as a unit of thought."

Your best short sentence is a simple declarative sentence with a subject, verb, and object. But whether it is a statement, question, or exclamation, a sentence that contains one idea is a simple sentence. Such sentences are usually short; they are usually clear.

To provide a change of pace in your writing, vary your sentence pattern and sentence length—good average about 17–19 words. Occasional sentence fragments (such as last two incomplete sentences in following example) help loosen up your writing; help avoid primerized, choppy sentences that are all the same length.

*Example:* Whenever you can shorten a sentence, do. And you always can. The best sentence? The shortest.

Some long sentences are easy to read if they are built around one idea or one related range of ideas. As Mark Twain advises beginning authors, "As a rule, write in short sentences. At times you may indulge yourself with a long sentence; but make sure there are no folds in it, no vaguenesses, no parenthetical interruptions of its view as a whole; when you have done with it, it won't be a sea-serpent with half of its arches under water; it will be a torchlight procession."

Note how Mark Twain packages the last 54 words in 4 independent units—4 sentences separated with semicolons. His parallel phrases make his words a *torchlight procession*; they make his words dramatic and easy to read.

Be sure you write sentences with parallel construction.

*Don't write:* A wide range of activities of the winning contestant included *playing tennis, preparation of manuscripts, and a study of birds*.

*Write:* The winning contestant did many things: she *played tennis, prepared manuscripts, and studied birds*.

Watch commenting *which* clauses. An occasional *which* is all right, if it is a *defining* *which*. Trouble is, when you start using *whiches* they multiply like rabbits. And they get you in trouble. For example, see if you can rescue the governor from these *whiches*:

Columbia, Tenn., *which* calls itself the largest mule market in the world, held a mule parade yesterday, *which* was headed by the governor.

Throw out every *commenting which* clause; make it into another sentence.

*Example:* Sentences stuffed with commenting *which* clauses, *which* can be made into other sentences, and *which* are found in the vitamin A college sample, should be made into more than one sentence.

*Better:* Don't stuff sentences with commenting *which* clauses. Make each clause into a separate sentence when you can. For example, you can make the *which* clauses in the vitamin A college sample into separate sentences.

Do not throw out *defining which* clause; you cannot omit it without changing meaning. Do not set off a defining clause with commas.

*Example:* Do not use DDT on alfalfa *that is to be fed to poultry, dairy cows, or animals fattened for slaughter*.

Many writers use *that* instead of *which* with defining clauses; they use *which* with commenting clauses, which they rarely use. (Commenting clause.) You usually use *that* instead of *which* when you talk.

Studies show: Children in the 8th grade can easily read sentences that average about 17 words. Popular magazines use a 17–19 word average sentence length as standard of what an average reader can read easily and quickly.

Next time you write something, check your average sentence length in a 100-word passage. If your sentences average more than 17–19 words, see if you can break up some sentences at the joints. Chances are you'll find a *which* lurking at some joint—the way they lurk in that college vitamin A sample. Throw out the *which* and make long sentences into shorter ones as in 7th grade revision of sample.

### **Briefly, how can you make hard sentences easy?**

First, put one idea in a sentence. Complex sentences stuffed with too many ideas and detours make sentences hard to read. Detours are usually commenting clauses and prepositional phrases.

*Example:* Put commenting clause, *which gets in the way of the reader and tangles him up*, in your next sentence. (19 words.)

*Better:* A commenting clause gets in reader's way; put it in your next sentence. (13 words, 2 sentences.)

Use only defining clauses, like this: A clause *that is necessary to make sense in a sentence* is a defining clause.

Never primerize and write all sentences the same length and same pattern:

Vary your sentence length: use some short sentences and balance with longer ones, each built around one idea or one related range of ideas. It isn't the long sentence but the complex sentence that confuses readers.

Vary your sentence pattern: sometimes use a simple declarative sentence (subject, predicate, object); then change the pace and use a personal sentence—a question or sentence fragment.

Let punctuation help your sentences communicate; sometimes use a colon or a semicolon instead of a period to separate independent clauses (as illustrated in previous paragraph).

Always remember—Don't pack many ideas in a sentence. Words go places in short sentences!

## Make Your Words Sell

A word is not a crystal, transparent and unchanging. It is the skin of a living thought and may vary in color and content according to the circumstances and time in which it is used. Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Good writing is based on the right word in the right place at the right time. You can't assume that homemakers will know what you mean when you use words in an unusual way, such as *bubble the cuff* in sewing instructions. Or that they can select your intended meaning when you instruct them to, *Cut the carrots in long strips and stand on the stove for 20 minutes*. You can make easy words hard and ambiguous when you don't use them in their proper relation.

Meanings of words change with the times. Silly once meant holy; fond meant foolish.

The following excerpt from a letter written in 1721 by Jonathan Swift illustrates how words change with the times. But Swift's message is still current as he urges a young clergyman to *write for his audience*:

"Professors in most arts and sciences are generally the worst qualified to explain their meanings

to those who are *not of their tribe*. . . . A divine has nothing to say to the wisest congregation of any parish in this kingdom which he may not express in a manner to be understood by the *meanest* among them. I will appeal to any man of letters whether at least 19 in 20 of those perplexing words, might not be changed into easy ones, such as first naturally occur to ordinary men, and probably did so at first, to those very gentlemen who are so fond of the *former*. . . . It is not very reasonable to expect that *common* men should understand expressions which are never made use of in common life."

Nowadays we consider *not of their tribe* as slang. We avoid such vague words as *former* and *latter*. We avoid referring to people as *meanest* and *common*.

How words are used in sentences change with the times. Many writers now use *like* as a conjunction instead of *as* to write *like* they talk. "London now looks *like* it did before the war," writes a New York newspaper.

Words mean different things to different people. Block may mean city block, butcher block, engine block, auction block, block of votes, or several other things.

Also, a word may have two kinds of meaning: (1) *denotation*—the dictionary definition—or (2) *connotation*—emotional meaning beyond the dictionary meaning. For example, the dictionary says "democracy" denotes "government by the people." "Democracy" is also loaded with connotations. It connoted seven different meanings to seven people who were asked what democracy meant to them: self-rule, anticommunism, America, Congress, the flag, Washington, and free elections.

It's hard to know the words your readers know, or what your words convey to them. Know the flexibility of the written word and its power to convey an idea. Know how to make your words behave so your readers will understand and not misunderstand. It's so easy to be misunderstood.

In one of his early polls, George Gallup asked about a person's *length of residence* and got the answer, 27 feet and 10 inches. Gallup made the same mistake that all of us make. He assumed that readers can read our minds and select the intended meaning of our double-barreled phrases. If he wanted a specific answer he should have asked a specific question, something like, *How long have you lived in your present home?* Simplification is a loosening up of text, a decrease in density.

**Use simplest word form.** When you loosen up your words and put some air spaces between them, they get easier to read. Main reason: you use words with few affixes—public enemy number one of clear writing. Affixes make writing abstract and complex.



What are *affixes*? Remember those parts of words we learned as *pre*fixes and *suf*fixes? How prefixes added at the beginning of root words change their meaning? (*disease*.) How suffixes added to the end of words change the word form or part of speech? (Examples—*preparation*, *growth* are verbal nouns made from verbs *pre*pare and *grow*.)

The more affixes you fix or fasten to words, the foggier they become. Affixes pile up when you use passive voice, past tense, prepositional phrases, participles, and verbal nouns—all enemies of readable writing. Altogether they build a smoke screen between you and your reader and your message can't get through.

The quickest way to generate thick affix fog is to change verbs into nouns and adjectives, as illustrated in this 43-word sentence with 27 affixes marked:

Heal *th*, grow *th*, de *vel*op *ment*, and for *ti*fic *ation* of the body a gain *st* all kinds of *dis*eases, all of which are *di*rect *ly* *af*fect *ed* by the *vi*tamin *con*tent of the *a*mounts and *in*creasing kinds of foods eaten, can be *in*fluenced by a *care*ful *se*lection and *pre*paration of foods.

Note how suffixes *th*, *ment*, and *tion* make live verbs (heal, develop, select) into abstract verbal nouns (health, development, selection.) Note how *ing* added to verb *increase* makes it a verbal adjective (*increasing*.) As pointed out earlier, how you use words determines their parts of speech.

**Streamline with verbs.** Live verbs are your best weapon against affix fog. To illustrate how live verbs can lift the fog in that 43-word sentence, let's change those verbals to verbs, change the word order, and talk to you the reader in 28 words with only 7 affixes:

"Choose and *pre*pare your foods *care*fully. The *vi*tamins you get in your food *af*fect how you feel, how you grow and *de*velop, and how you fight off *dis*eases." (2 sentences average 14 words.)

Live verbs help loosen up your writing. A live verb is the engine of your sentence, the engine of your title, and the engine of your subhead. A live verb is in active voice. It makes your words march, and your words must march without detours to communicate clearly.

**Use technical words wisely.** Sometimes you must use technical words such as "vitamin" that have no simpler synonyms or simple definitions. Use the technical word but be sure to introduce it into a context of familiar ideas.

When Mr. and Mrs. Average American sat down to dinner in 1915, chances are they had never heard of vitamins. No radio program was telling them to take one a day. Vitamin was a scientist's word but now it's part of our everyday vocabulary. How did it get that way? Popular writers surrounded *vitamin* with what the layman knows: foods where you find vitamins and what they do for you (as illustrated in the 7th grade sample on vitamin A in preceding section on sentences).

Remember that every new experience, every new idea, has to be built by recalling old ones—the way an Indiana 4-H Club girl explained the importance of vitamins in terms familiar to her club members. As she was talking, a bored member said, "Phooey, what good are vitamins?" Undaunted, the 4-H girl replied, "If you don't eat vitamins, you get all dilapidated."

Don't define a hard word by a harder word. If you must use *calorie*, use it; but don't make it harder by defining *calorie* as, *the quantity of heat necessary to effect a rise of temperature of one degree Centigrade of a cube of water each dimension of which is one-tenth part of the length of a bar of platinum and iridium alloy lying in the observatory of St. Cloud.*

Define *calorie* with concrete picture words; identify it with what the layman knows: *Three cubes of sugar or a small pat of butter give you 100 calories.*

In putting your message across you must relate your thoughts to the other person's experience, and do so quickly. Short, easy words—common words that everyone knows—do this job best.

Gearing your writing to your readers' experience and understanding is one of the secrets of not talking *down* to your readers; the secret of not embarrassing them by writing *over* their heads.

**Use the simplest word that carries your meaning.** Illinois succeeded in getting chinch bugs to *move* instead of always *migrating*; they *built* barriers instead of *constructing* them; they got rid of *sticks and leaves* instead of *debris*.

As Mark Twain used to say, "I never say *metropolis* for 7 cents when I can get the same price for *city*."

People remember short words. "The finest words in the world are only vain sounds, if you cannot comprehend them," said Anatole France (Nobel Prizewinner 1921).

A soap company found Anatole France's statement to be true when they planned to use the word *concentrated* in an advertisement, but discovered many housewives thought it meant *blessed by the Pope*.

As Edwin C. Woolley, English professor at the University of Wisconsin, said in 1907: "Showy language, like showy dress, is in bad taste. . . . Straining for high-sounding expressions to replace plain English makes a style weak and crude. Call



a leg a leg, not a limb; call a book a book, not an effort; call a letter a letter, not a kind favor. . . ."

Look up difficult words in your dictionary and find simpler synonyms if you can. Do use your dictionary; it's still a reliable tool for writers.

**Penalty of plain words.** To say what you mean can be dangerous. Sometimes technical writers hedge and write vaguely because they are afraid of the penalty of plain words.

Economists are often forced to leave loopholes by saying, *it seems* or *it would appear*, *it may be* or some such evasive remark. When you hedge with such weasel words, your chances are slim of getting your ideas across to average readers.

**What about using slang?** If a pun or current slang phrase expresses a thought in a unique way that no other words can communicate, use it; but use slang with caution. It all depends on the *what*, *who*, and *why* of your writing.

Slang sometimes lightens a humdrum sentence, such as, *This story is so interesting, so intelligently constructed, so beautifully styled—and so phony.*

Slang may help localize your writing by making it colloquial and current, as illustrated by Sinclair Lewis's sentence, "Maybe the *kids* don't put on their hats right after supper and take off like they used to since television has come." (Note how he uses like.)

Leaflets with slang titles such as, *Two Pests Gang Up on Cotton* and *Slug the Bugs* are eye-catchers that bait audiences who resist reading.

A play on words can give writing a folksy touch. When original, such expressions liven up writing; when overused, they become clichés—figures of speech that lose their effectiveness through overuse. Some timeworn clichés: diamond in the rough, shoulder to the wheel.

What is timeworn often depends on individual taste. English proverbs that date back to the 1600's are still being used, such as: "A bee in his bonnet"; "Blood is thicker than water"; and "As blind as a bat." "Birds of a feather flock together" goes back to Aristotle. "Till the cows come home" goes back to Jonathan Swift.

Both slang and clichés become stale and boring when not current; they date you. Use with caution. As Charles Lamb said, "A pun is a pistol let off at the ear; not a feather to tickle the intellect."

Sometimes you have to tickle the ear to reach the intellect. As Ben Franklin did in his popular pun, "We must all hang together, or we shall hang separately."

**Briefly, how can you make hard words easy?** Choose your words by the company they keep—

1. Use the *simplest word form* that carries your

meaning. Use verbs; they have fewer affixes than nouns and adjectives made from verbs. Just as birds of a feather flock together, so do words with many affixes flock together with *which* clauses, prepositional phrases, and passive verbs. "Don't confound the language of the nation with long-tailed words in *osily* and *ation*," said John Hookham Frere over a century ago.

2. Use the *simplest word* that carries your meaning: rising instead of spiraling; equal instead of equivalent. Caution: Some short words (like toxic) are less familiar than long ones (like poisonous).

3. Use *specific words* that readers understand and don't misunderstand. Avoid using words with double-barrelled meanings, such as *At our next civil defense meeting we shall select block heads*. Better: block wardens. Use specific words to give instructions: level teaspoonful or cupful rather than heaping, scant, or generous.

Be careful with your words; they mean different things to different people: yarn—a story; yarn—a thread. Same words—different meanings.

Express simple ideas in fewest simple words: say rain rather than inclement weather. Same meaning—different words.

Use *slang* or *cliches* if they bait your readers by giving your writing a current flavor; *but use with caution*. Slang and clichés seem better suited for leaflets put out for a current program than for longer publications put out for posterity.

4. Introduce *technical words* with no simpler synonyms *into a context of familiar* ideas. Cushion the difficult concept of words like "vitamin" by surrounding them with what your lay reader knows: what vitamins do for you, and where you find them.

Follow the golden rule of Julius Caesar: "Shun the unusual word as a rock at sea." The trick is to choose and use technical words the way you take medicine. Remember, it's the *overdose* that's fatal.

## Personal Words Sell

Begin with a clear conception that the subject of deepest interest to the average human being is himself; next to that, he is most concerned about his neighbor. Horace Greeley

Personalize your writing. Populate your writing with people when people belong there; this depends on *who* your readers are, *what* you tell them, and *why*.

Whatever you do, try not to leave out human interest. Remember, your reader is a human being.

Hitch your facts to a person, for everything that is important in life begins and ends with man. Back of every fact there is a human activity. Report that activity: tell how someone does something, like this:

Joseph Priestley, clergyman-turned-chemist, was as unorthodox in his views about science as he was about politics. He was not content to go by the book. He probed. He tested. He challenged. And his first discovery was his greatest: a *new air* that Antoine Lavoisier later called *oxygen*.

Doesn't this bait and hold your interest? All bestsellers are highly personalized; in many, every fourth and fifth word is a personal word. Popular magazines' journalistic formula is built on human interest. They report news by telling what people do. They know that scientific tests show that people read better when reading about people than about anything else.

**Names make news.** We all like to read about names; especially our own, and about people we know. That's why the home town column with local flavor is so popular.

Local columns are often written in that informal me-to-you style—the way you talk to readers. Talking directly to reader helps him identify himself with your information; this is an important factor in motivating people to read your article. People like plain talk with *you* appeal.

When you talk to or about people, you use the simple sentence pattern of narration: subject, verb, object. You write in active voice rather than passive. You use live action verbs, short words, few verbals, and few prepositional phrases.

You don't smother your ideas in passive voice like this:

Neither growth nor health can be sustained unless the daily foods provide certain essentials which are called vitamins.

*You say:* You need vitamins. Everyone does— young and old. You need vitamins to build a healthy body and to keep fit and strong.

**Cookbook style talks to you.** *You* is implied in the cookbook style of writing—one of the best ways to give specific instructions. How-to-do information is easier to read and understand than descriptions of what something is.

To illustrate, here are two excerpts on how to make fruit ices. The 9th grade version is impersonal, full of passive verbs and big words. You can say the same thing in 7th grade cookbook lan-

guage if you: (1) shorten some of the words; (2) change verbals back to verbs (preparation becomes make); (3) put *you* in front of live verbs (you either expressed or understood).

#### BEFORE (9th grade)

##### Home Preparation of Fruit Ices

Fruit ices with a creamy consistency can be made from whole fruits without the addition of any milk or milk products. The preparation of the ices to be described in this paper is somewhat different from the process for making ordinary water ices since larger amounts of the puree of the fruit are used.

Apples are washed, the stem and calyx removed and quartered. The quartered apples are blanched in steam or boiling water for 3 or 4 minutes or sufficient time to soften them somewhat and to prevent darkening.

#### AFTER (7th grade)

##### Fruit Ices—Make Them at Home

In your own kitchen you can make creamy fruit ices from whole fruit without milk or milk products. Fruit ices differ from ordinary water ices because they are made from the puree of fruit.

Wash apples, core, and quarter. Blanch them in boiling water for 3 or 4 minutes—long enough to soften and prevent darkening.

Of course, you can't write everything in cookbook style with *you* implied; or even in second person with *you* expressed. It would be too monotonous. Often you can personalize in third person as follows:

*Example:* People write like they talk in shirt-sleeve English. Harvard Professor Kittredge says we use that brand most these days.

This 19-word excerpt shows how you can write in short (10-word) sentences when you personalize in third person. But use caution so you don't come up with double-barrelled expressions like. . . *when the farmer takes his hide to the tanner.*

Skillful writers frequently write in first person. G. K. Chesterton writes about "What I Found in My Pocket" this way:

"I have only once in my life picked a pocket, and then (perhaps through some absentmindedness) I picked my own."

Sometimes passive voice is necessary and acceptable. Examples: The furrow drill *is recommended* for planting winter barley. (Or) This slogan *is lettered* on some New York sprinkler carts, "Our city—yours and mine—help keep it clean."

You must use judgment in personalizing. You can't just sprinkle your information with a lot of we's and you's the way you season soup with salt and pepper. Come to think of it, you can get too much seasoning in soup—the amount depends on the taste and health of people who eat the soup.

Write to a typical reader or to a typical group of readers. Don't just shoot in the air aimlessly. Even if you don't reach the person you are aiming at, you are more likely to reach somebody than if you aim at nobody. That's why it's so important to know your readers.

**Personalized titles bait readers.** You can bait readers' interest with eye-catching titles and live subheads. When possible, get *you* and a live verb in your title. For example, "How *You* Can Fix *Your* Household Equipment" has more appeal than "Maintenance of Household Equipment."

Sometimes third person pronouns or *people words* liven up your titles or subheads. Arthur Brisbane's advice on titles given to a young writer illustrates how personalizing in third person helps identify subject with layman's interest.

The young writer brought him a story entitled, "Hygienics and Dietetics in Ancient Times." As Brisbane read the article he was amazed to find the article was interesting: in realistic style the author compared modern and ancient health and living standards. But with that title, he told the writer, only a few college professors would read it. Brisbane changed title to, "Pity Poor Moses—He Had No Bathtub." Now everyone will be interested to read it, he said.

#### **Briefly, how can you make dead writing alive?**

"Talk" to or about people.

Use concrete words with few affixes.

Change verbals back to verbs.

Put people in front of the verbs and tell how someone does something—in active voice.

*Instead of saying:* There is apt to be a considerable decline in consumer demand next year.

*Say:* People may buy less next year.

Use judgment in personalizing. Don't do what the village blacksmith did when he instructed his apprentice as follows: "When I take the shoe out of the fire, I'll lay it on the anvil; and when I nod my head you hit it with the hammer." The apprentice did just as he was told. Now, he's the village blacksmith.

Whatever you do, try to hitch your facts to a person, or your writing will be neuter gender. Don't worry if your stuff is highbrow or lowbrow. WORRY WHETHER IT'S INTERESTING. Don't be dull; you can't survive the yawns of readers.

## **Personal Sentences Sell**

**Write in a way that comes naturally.** E. B. White, Author.

When you write the way you talk, you use personal sentences. These are questions, exclamations, sentences starting with verbs, spoken sentences, and incomplete sentences—sentences directed to your reader. Personal sentences are common in speech; you use them every day. You say things like:

Is it easy reading? (question)

What a readable book! (exclamation)

Write for your readers. (starts with verb)

"You weaken your nouns with adjectives," said the expert. (spoken sentence)

Read any books lately? Good question. (sentence fragments)

To combat resistance to sentence fragments (grammatically incomplete sentences), here is Fowler's definition of a sentence from his *Dictionary of Modern English Usage*: "A sentence means a set of words complete in itself, having either *expressed* or *understood* in it a subject and a predicate, and conveying a statement or question or command or exclamation."

Let's put some fragmentary and other personal sentences in that foggy vitamin A sample with 46-word sentences (p. 7). Change the sentence pattern and sentence pace and turn out 3 paragraphs with 7 sentences that average 13 words.

Having trouble with infections? Maybe you need Vitamin A.

Can't afford vitamins? You don't have to buy them in a bottle; buy them in your food. Ripe yellow and green vegetables and some red ones—squash, spinach, and tomatoes, for example—give you vitamin A. You can get vitamin A in liver, butter, and eggs, as well as in fruits such as oranges and peaches.

Bright colors in food are often—though not always—like flags, signaling with yellow, green, orange, or red, *This way for vitamin A.*

**Briefly, how can you make impersonal sentences personal?** Write the way you talk—in person-to-person sentences, in personal sentences aimed straight at your reader. Use personal sentences naturally. They help you vary sentence length and sentence pattern, shorten average sentence length, and talk to your reader in active voice.

Whenever you can talk to your reader, do. And you always can. How? With personal sentences!



# Trim Your Writing

He that uses many words for explaining any subject, doth, like the cuttle fish, hide himself in his own ink. John Wray.

About 300 years later, Flesch says the same thing in his book, "How to Write, Speak, and Think More Effectively:" "Learn to cut. The most common fault of writing is wordiness. . ."

Learn the art of not saying everything, especially not in one sentence. Express the highlights; don't impress reader with all you know. As Shakespeare said, "When words are scarce they're seldom spent in vain."

Pruning your writing is as important as planning or preparing it; for "there is no such thing as good writing—there is only good re-writing." Write no more than you need to get your message across.

## Hunt and Weed

**Go on a which hunt.** Hunt for commenting *which* clauses; make each clause into another sentence without the *which*.

*Why say:* Tax reductions *which* go into effect this month have been made financially feasible by substantial reductions in government expenditures.

*Say:* We are cutting down your taxes beginning this month. We can do this because we cut down government expenses.

**Go on a be hunt** to weed out passive voice. *Be* disguises and tags onto other verbs and makes writing impersonal. Hunt for *be* in all its six disguises (am, are, is, was, were, been) when they make verbs passive, like this:

It *is* earnestly recommended that every effort *be* made by the author to make sure that passive voice *is* changed to active voice so that the writing of the author can *be* more easily understood by the reader. (38 words.)

*Say the same thing in 14 words:* Change passive verbs to active so your reader can understand your writing more easily.

Sometimes you must use forms of *be* as link verbs.

*Example.* Live verbs *are* in active voice.

## Weed Out Unnecessary:

**Ideas.** Stick to your slant, your central theme. If you are writing a leaflet about how to get rid of silver fish, tell how.

**Introductions.** Take a nosedive right into your subject: identify it quickly with reader's interest.

**Sentences.** Weed out irrelevant sentences.

**Parts of sentences.** Weed out unnecessary phrases and clauses that get in reader's way. Why puzzle reader with this mumbo jumbo?

It is well-nigh imperative that a new stronger relationship which is founded upon a mutual understanding and appreciation should be developed between the buyer and the seller. (27 words.)

*Six words say the same thing:* Buyers and sellers should get together.

**Words.** Weed out unnecessary words—empty words such as conjunctions, prepositions, and articles.

Weed out unnecessary CONJUNCTIONS like *and*, *as*, *while*, *because*; sometimes you can replace them with a semicolon.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. (You don't miss *and* in the 23d Psalm.)

See how you can improve these sentences by omitting the words in brackets.

Beware [of] the pitchfork; [as] it is a dangerous weapon.

The show rooms are on the first floor; [while] the upper floors are used for storage. (It's best to use *while* in sentences denoting time, such as: The furniture arrived *while* she was away.)

Often you can leave out *that*. Let your ear guide you. As Elizabeth Browning wrote: "'Twas her thinking of others made you think of her." Read her sentence aloud and you'll hear she didn't need *that*. In the following sentence you'll hear you need *that*: She felt *that* her manuscript was unreadable.



Weed out PREPOSITIONS that pile up in sentences like this.

One *of* the most important sources *of* dissatisfaction *with* the role *of* homemaker, particularly *in* respect *to* the upper group, was the lack *of* time *for* the pursuit *of* personal interests. (31 words, 9 prepositions.)

Say the same thing in 16 words, 3 prepositions:

Homemakers (especially those *in* upper brackets) were most dissatisfied *about* not having enough time *for* themselves.

Weed out ARTICLES—*a, an, the*. You don't need them half the time. To illustrate, weed out *the* (and preposition *of*) in the following: [The] making [of] silage is one of the best ways of preserving [the] roughage.

Sometimes say workers, instead of a worker.

Weed out PARTS OF WORDS—affixes that make your writing foggy. Why smother verbs with affixes? You can *reinforce* instead of *making a reinforcement*.

Weed out REDUNDANT WORDS.

*These Doublets Date You*

*Say*

very latest	latest
same identical	same
absolutely complete	complete
many in number	many
necessary requirements	requirements
basic fundamentals	fundamentals
cooperate together	cooperate
consensus of opinion is	consensus is
ask the question	ask
for a period of two weeks	for two weeks
factual information	facts

Weed out compound prepositions and conjunctions such as: inasmuch as, insofar as, for the reason that, in such a degree as, due to the fact that, to such a degree as, in view of the fact that. *Because* or *since* say the same thing.

**Challenge every adjective**, especially *commenting* adjectives. A good rule to follow: If an adjective defines a noun (such as *defining* adjective), leave it in. When you use concrete nouns with live verbs you need only an occasional adjective to describe something. Illustration—the way Carl Sandburg describes Lincoln: “That evening Lincoln took the train back to Washington. He was *weary*, talked little, stretched out on the seats and had a *wet* towel laid across his forehead.”

If you must use adjectives, use only defining adjectives. Don't pile them all up before the nouns they *tell on*. Separate them like this: She was a fat lady—more pillow than willowy. As writer Bruce

Barton says, “Adjectives are like leaves on a switch. If you want the switch to cut, strip off the leaves.”

Avoid vague adjectives and adverbs—those indefinite words that express degree, such as substantial (substantially), appreciable (appreciably), considerable (considerably), rather, somewhat, very, pretty, little (best used to indicate size). These words clog your message; they give your reader no standard of comparison. For example: *This is a subject of considerable importance*. Tell the same message with *This is important*.

**Weed out dangling participles**. These verbal adjectives can puzzle your reader when you dangle them in sentences like this: Walking down the street, the Washington Monument towers over everything. Obviously you expect your reader to untangle this to read: Walking down the street, I saw the Washington Monument tower over everything. Always remember—your participle at beginning of sentence must have a noun to lean on. *I* supports *walking*.

## Trim Words But Not the Meaning

Don't take short cuts at the cost of clarity. Statements like this can be too terse and give a double-barrelled meaning: “The male head of the family is seemingly the most frequent user of government publications followed closely by the wife.”

“Feed a cold and starve a fever” has been misunderstood for years. What the doctor actually wrote was, “If you feed a cold, you will later have to starve a fever.”

## When You Prune You Polish

Delete dead wood: don't leave in a single which, whereas, as a matter of fact that.

Delete weasel words: it is not impossible, available evidence would tend to indicate that it is not unreasonable to suppose. The best thing that can happen to such words is surgery by your own hand.

When you change verbals back to verbs, you automatically prune and polish.

*Why say*: Present design methods are increasingly predicated on the assumption that two-piece suits are the preference of the best-dressed women. (19 words.)

*Write about people, not things; turn design methods into designers and say*: Today's designers assume best-dressed women prefer two-piece suits. (8 words.)

Shun “tion” words, “ing” words, and perilous prepositions. Say less in shorter words to bait the layman’s interest. A popular writer focuses on one point, cuts out unnecessary words and affixes, and streamlines “A Compilation of the Vitamin Values of Foods in Relation to Processing and Other Variants” into “Vitamins from Farm to You.”

Challenge every conjunction, preposition, article, adjective, and adverb; use sparingly. Take a tip from the Indian who won first prize for writing the following story on a dilapidated house and washed-away field.

“Both pictures show white man crazy. Make tepee, plow hill. Water wash. Wind blow soil,

grass all gone. Squaw gone, papoose too. No chuck-away. No pig, no corn, no hay, no cow, no pony.

“Indian no plow land. Keep grass. Buffalo eat. Indian eat buffalo, hide make tepee, moccasins, too. Indian no make terrace. No build dam. No give dam. All time eat. No hunt job. No hitch-hike. No ask relief. No shoot pig. Great spirit make grass. Indian no waste anything. Indian no work. White man heap crazy.”

This bit of early American shows: [The] English [language] is [about one-]half redundant.

BREVITY IS THE ART OF SAYING VOLUMES WITHOUT WRITING THEM.

## Check Your Writing

. . . it is supremely vital to convey ideas so that basic truths may be better understood by more people . . . This puts a premium on the techniques of Readability . . . Alan J. Gould, Executive Editor, Associated Press

Unfortunately there is no button-pressing gadget that will produce a best seller. But using yardsticks like the Flesch Readability Formula No. 2 gives us some guideposts to follow for making writing easier to read. Its four factors remind us to use short sentences, simple words, personal words, and personal sentences.

This formula gives us only a rough estimate of “How Easy” and “How Interesting” our writing is. Are we writing over our readers’ heads? Is it dull reading? Like a thermometer the formula registers the degree of *Reading Ease* and *Human Interest*.

It does not give us an overall diagnosis of all factors that enter into getting our writing read. The formula does not test how well we select, sift, and sort our subject matter. It does not measure the effectiveness of layout, illustrations, size of type, or color of paper and ink. All these factors and many others influence readability or reader understanding.

The Flesch Formula does not tell us how to write; it helps us estimate how clearly we write for our readers. It is an objective measurement and takes personal opinion out of criticism. It helps us find the words and sentences that need simplifying.

Figuring average sentence length and word length gives us a clue to “How Easy.” Figuring *percentage* of personal words and personal sentences gives us a clue to “How Interesting.”

To illustrate, let’s test this garden passage according to the formula instructions on the “How Easy” and “How Interesting” charts (pages 18 and 19).

“Much of the work *commonly* as *sociated* with *garden*ing may be *avoided* by the *proper* choice of tools and *equipment*. Tools and *equipment* of one type or an *other* are used for at least six *garden*ing *oper a tions*, *name ly*, *start ing* plants, *pre par ing* the soil, *seed ing*, *set ting* plants, *sup press ing* weeds, and *control ling* in *sects* and *diseases*. One might *expect* that to do all these things the *sup ply* of tools and *equipment* *needed* by the *average* *garden*er would be *extensive* and *cost ly*. On the *con trary*, *al though* many are a *vail a ble*, *com para tive ly* few *actual ly* are *need ed* *provided* they are *care fully* *selected* and *proper ly* used at the right time.” (100 words)

To estimate the Reading Ease of sample, first count 100 words. To save time, put a number at end of each<sup>1</sup> 10 words: put 1 after first 10 words; put 2<sup>2</sup> after 20 words, and so on until you bracket the<sup>3</sup> 100th word. (32 words—count as 3 sentences)

Then *figure average sentence length*: count the number of sentences and divide into your 100 words—the way we counted 3 sentences in preceding 32-word passage.

A semicolon or colon counts as a period if there is a complete sentence on each side of it. But beware: don't just automatically look for colons and semicolons as sentence stops. (Count as 2 sentences.)

Garden sample has 4 *period* sentences; 4th sentence ends at 100th word. Usually your 100-word sample will end somewhere within a sentence. Count that sentence *only* if your sample ends in the last *half* of the sentence. Otherwise do not count sentence.

Next, *figure word length*. Count syllables the way you pronounce the word. To save time underline all syllables except the first as you read the words aloud. Each of 100 words (already counted) has at least 1 syllable. Add 100 to 70 extras (syllables in italics in garden sample). Total syllables 170.

Sentence length (25 words) and word length (170 syllables), together, give the *Reading Ease* score. Figure that from the "How Easy" chart, page 18.

To estimate *Human Interest*, figure the *percent* of personal words; this is the same as the number of personal words in 100-word samples. (Garden sample has no personal words.)

Then figure the *percent* (not number) of personal sentences—sentences directed to reader discussed in

section "Personal Sentences Sell." See Table 1, page 18, for computing percentage of personal sentences. (Garden sample has no personal sentences.) Human Interest score is 0—Dull reading.

With that difficult score, the formula tells us to break up those long sentences into shorter ones. It tells us to shorten some words and weed out unnecessary weasel words (commonly associated with, on the contrary). It tells us to change passive voice (may be avoided, are used, are needed) to active voice and talk to *you* the reader.

Let's apply these suggestions: let's package the same information in three paragraphs instead of one, and turn out this 5th grade version:

"The right tools help save time and work; and they make *gardening easier* and *cheaper*. You need *only* a few tools if you choose them *carefully* and use them in the right way at the right time. Check what you have to do and what tools will be most *useful*.

"With *power* tools you can *easily* plow your *garden* to get a fine, loose, *level* seed *bed*.

"When you don't use *power* tools, you can *pre-  
pare* your soil with a spade or *spading* fork and a rake. *Using* a fork and rake is more work but just as *effective* if well] done." (101 words)

Comparing the scores of the two versions tells the following story—

HOW EASY

	<i>Sentence length</i>	<i>Word length</i>	<i>Grade level</i>
Original	25 words (4 sentences):	170 syllables	College
Rewrite	14 words (7 sentences):	121 syllables	5th grade

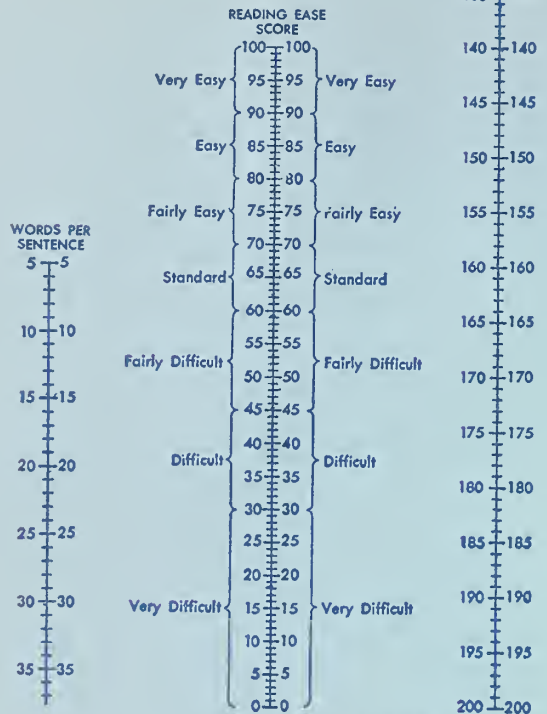
HOW INTERESTING

	<i>Personal words</i>	<i>Personal sentences</i>	<i>Human interest</i>
Original	0%	0%	Dull
Rewrite	8%	57%	Very Interesting



# How Easy?

**HOW TO USE THIS CHART**  
Take a pencil or ruler and connect your "Words per Sentence" figure (left) with your "Syllables per 100 Words" figure (right). The intersection of the pencil or ruler with the center line shows your "Reading Ease" score.



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To estimate Reading Ease: 1) Test 100-word samples. Select samples by a numerical scheme—say every second paragraph on every second or fourth page. 2) Start counting words at beginning of a paragraph; bracket 100th word. Count as one word anything surrounded by white space, such as: 100-word, &, o, U.S., 1961, week-end.

3) Figure average sentence length for each 100-word sample, or for all samples combined. Divide 100 words by the number of sentences. Count as a sentence each complete unit of thought (independent clause) if its end is marked by a period, question mark, exclamation point, semicolon, or colon.

4) Figure word length. Count syllables the way you pronounce the word or symbol: asked (1 syllable); tested (2 syllables); 1960 (4 syllables—nine teen six ty); 2 syllables for \$ (dol lors).

Follow boxed instructions to find your Reading Ease score.

**No. 1—Table for computing—Percentage of Personal Sentences per 100 Words**

Number of personal sentences in sample

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	100%								
2	50	100%							
3	33	67 *	100%						
4	25	50	75	100%					
5	20	40	60	80	100%				
6	17	33	50	67	83	100%			
7	14	28	43	57 *	71	86	100%		
8	12	25	38	50	63	75	88	100%	
9	11	22	33	44	55	67	78	89	100%

\* If you have 3 sentences in your sample and 2 are personal, you have 67 percent personal sentences. If you have 7 sentences in your sample and 4 are personal, you have 57 percent personal sentences.

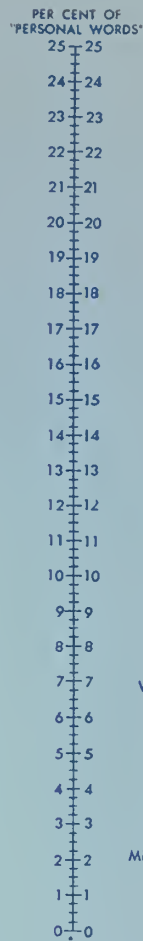


# How Interesting?

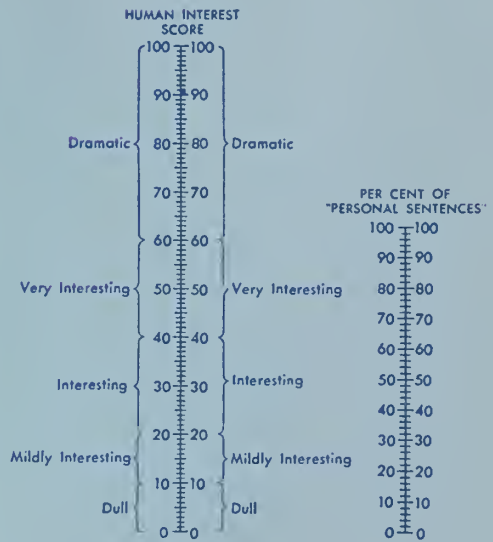
To estimate Human Interest: 1) Test 100-word samples. 2) Count personal words in each—all proper names denoting persons and all pronouns whose antecedents are persons (you, we, they, he), plus “people” nouns of masculine or feminine gender such as: man, woman, son, daughter, people, actor, actress; but not vocational nouns with common gender (doctor, lawyer, merchant). Figure percentage of personal words (same as number in 100-word samples).

3) Figure percentage (not number) of personal sentences (questions, commands, requests, and other sentences in sample). Two out of 4 sentences is 50% personal sentences. See table 1 for computing percentage of personal sentences per 100 words.

Find your Human Interest score according to boxed instructions.



**HOW TO USE THIS CHART**  
Take a pencil or ruler and connect your “Personal Words” figure (left) with your “Personal Sentences” figure (right). The intersection of the pencil or ruler with the center line shows your “Human Interest” score.



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Remember, a readability formula is not a writing rule, but a tool to help you write the way you talk. That’s the way you must write to communicate to the millions—to communicate clearly to average readers in words they read rather than skip. Writing the way you talk is as old as conversation, as old as the Psalms that tell us, “My tongue is the pen of a ready writer.”

When your story must be convincing, READABILITY does the job. It’s the know-how of making sense for readers, the know-how of writing words that work.

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## First Aid for Writers

### PLAN

Know your readers, your purpose, your subject.

*Think:* Select, sift, sort, sell your facts.

### WRITE

Convey your message clearly in short words and short sentences.

Talk to your reader in personal words and personal sentences.

Pack your writing with appeal: tie in with reader's interests.

### TRIM

Prune words and sentences: cut away affixes and *which* clauses.

Delete deadwood: trim everything but essentials.

Plan, prepare, *prune*, *polish*.

### CHECK

Is your writing easy for average readers with . . .

17-19 words per sentence?

150-155 syllables per 100 words?

7% personal words and 15% personal sentences per 100 words?

**The more your words tell, the more they sell.**